

## **Ethnolinguistic Study of Thoti Speakers Of Telangana**

**N. Susheel Kumar, Ph.D. Applied Linguistics**  
Centre For Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies  
University of Hyderabad  
[susheel.hcu@gmail.com](mailto:susheel.hcu@gmail.com)

### **Introduction**

The paper discusses about the social organisation of Thoti tribes of Telangana state and paints an elaborate picture of the ethnolinguistic aspect of their lifestyle. It gives a detailed analysis of all the arenas of their lives in order to understand Thoti community in a wholistic manner. The paper aims at shedding light on the cultural behaviour of this tribe.

### **Structure of Thoti Community**

The Thoti tribe of Telangana have a stereotypical hierarchy of social structure. The village is led by the village head who, along with the elders of the tribe, forms the basic framework of the community. 'Panch' is the political organisation that works at the basic level in the village. It includes 'patla', 'Mahajan', 'Devvari' and 'Havaladar'. Any decision is made after consulting the head including marriages. The village head plays a major role in the day to day activities of the tribe and is expected to be experienced.

The village head is selected by everyone in the village based on his forefathers, his age, experience, attitude, character, influence and his ability to solve the problems amicably since the Thoti community would never go to courts. Whatever the issue is, it gets solved in the presence of the village head and his verdict is considered to be final.

Apart from communications within the village, if there is any occasion to meet with the Thotis of other villages, all of them will gather at a place. A message would be sent through someone to every village during the olden days. Now, with the exposure to technological advancements we see that mobile phones are very much a part of their daily lives but during the olden days they had to travel everywhere on foot to pass on the information. The information will be written on a piece of paper and would be sent through a member of the village.

When sending a letter across to the community members in other villages, in case of a death the letter would be marked with ash (connection to death) to symbolise the grief and in case of an auspicious news they mark the letter with turmeric and *Kumkum*. This makes it easier for the receiver of the letter to anticipate the news.

The Thotis are a non-agricultural community and their profession, singing *Pandava Kathas* and *Bharatam* (stories from Indian epic Mahabharata), demands that they travel to other parts of the district or the state. Earlier, untouchability was rampant and members of the other caste treated the Thotis as untouchables. People gave alms to Thotis without touching them. Now the situation is changing slowly. Thoti people are now allowed to sit along with others. They are being called for many functions to perform. They are respected well now that the untouchability issue has gradually reduced comparatively.

These people were kept away from the villages in olden days. They lived separately in distant lands away from the society. Since they are used to such living conditions and not willing to mingle with the mainstream society, they prefer to stay away from cities or towns. It has been this way for so long that even if there are people willing to help the Thotis mingle with the mainstream society, they are being hesitant. Now we are able to see a slow change in their attitude with a small number of Thotis coming out for the purpose of education, jobs etc.

### **Kinship**

The Thotis have a clear structure of kinship within the community. They have different exogamous kinfolks among themselves. These kinfolks are again divided into other subcategory clans. This division is based on the number of brothers in each particular group. They are *Yerwan Saga*, *Sarwan Saga*, *Siwen Saga* and *Nalwan Saga*. They put their surnames before their personal names. Usually it is their clan names that they put as their surnames. Women have to change their clan name into that of their husband's after the marriage. Unlike the mainstream society, they support widow marriage and levirate. Levirate is the practice of marrying elder brother's wife after the former's death. Even though monogamy is the general practice that is found, polygamy is also permissible among them. Father is the most respected authority in the family followed by the mother. Elders of the family play an important role in laying the foundation of the family system. Joint family system, that they were following, started being invisible because of several factors like division of land and other properties. These days Thotis generally prefer nuclear family system.

### **Attire and Adornments**

During marriages men wear *lungi* or *dhothi* (traditional attire of men consisting of a rectangular piece of cloth tied at the waist reaching the ankle) and women wear a *langa-woni* (traditional attire for women consisting of a long skirt, blouse and a flowing piece of cloth tied around the torso), and jacket. The bride and groom sit in the above-mentioned attire for marriage. Girl doesn't wear many ornaments. She wears a nose ring which is not a regular nose ring that we find these days. This nose ring is a gold wire made into the shape of a ring and worn by the bride. The *Thaali Bottu* (ornament signifying the marital status of women) that they wear is made of turmeric. The thread for making the *Thaali* is also applied with turmeric powder. With the changing trend the young brides these days wear *Thaali* made of gold after few days of marriage but, on the day of marriage, the *Thaali* should still be made of turmeric only. The girl won't be having any ornaments except a black thread in her neck during marriage. The dress people wear during marriage and on normal days differ. The bride will be wearing a yellow colour saree and a yellow colour jacket. Earlier there used to be a process of making a long

white material dyed yellow for the bride but nowadays readymade sarees in yellow are available. The groom will be given a lungi or a dhoti.

We don't see many ornaments in the Thoti tradition. The one ornament that is permanently seen on the women of this community is their nose ring and this is a practice passed down many generations. In the earlier days, identifying a Thoti woman was an easy task. Since tattooing is compulsory for any Thoti, women generally have three dots tattooed on their chin. Therefore, any woman with the chin tattoo was considered to belong to the Thoti community. Tattoos were compulsory for any Thoti during olden days. Once a child was born, it was a given fact that they will be tattooed at one point in their lives. With changing trends and increased exposure to the mainstream society, we can see a fall in the tattooing tradition with the youngsters of this community. We now find very few women with such tattoos. If a family consists of four members, women of that family will have four dots or smileys as tattoos by which one can easily know the strength of a family. Men tend to have tattoos of their parents' or brother's name on their hands. The reason for tattooing the names of elders is a kind of gratitude towards the elders and remembering all the hard work for raising them up. Those days, Thotis were not in a position to afford photo and videography. So, this tattooing of elder's names on hands was a way of etching the memory forever.

Thoti women are simple in their dressing and do not have a long list of ornaments. When it comes to hair ornaments it is absolutely nothing. They tie their hair up in a not and secure it with a hair net made of thread. They call this a "*Siga*". They wear earring but nothing more than a round stud. Danglers or hangings are not the choice. Traditionally the womenfolk wear bangles till the elbow but as the case with most of the traditional practices, we don't see this with the younger generation. Apart from this, they wear rings made of silver. For hands and ankles, they wear a thick bangle-like ornament called "*Kadiyam*". It has to be noted that all these ornaments are made of silver since gold is not affordable by the Thoti community.

If a woman becomes a widow, she is expected to express her choice to the village head. The options being, she can either choose to stay a widow or choose to remarry. In case she chooses to stay a widow, she should wear a white saree and is not allowed to wear any ornaments. But in case she chooses to get remarried, the village head chooses a suitor for her and she gets to lead a normal life. Woman of the community are not abandoned treated well even in such situations unlike many of the other communities.

Village head will be the person who stands by the couple for any marriage. The attire of the village head would be white *lalchi* and *paijama* (a long shirt-like top paired with a pair of pants). The village head is easily recognisable and appears different from the rest of community when it comes to dressing and appearance.

### **Food Habits**

Low income levels in the tribe means a very simple variety of cuisine. The Thotis usually ask for alms for their food. Apart from begging for rice and lentils, the Thotis also depend on hunting for

their nutrition supply. They hunt birds and fishes. With the limited supply of resources, the Thotis prepare a wide variety of pickles. Pickles are usually prepared with mango, tomato, tamarind etc. Food is stored either in earthen pots or vessels since there is no electronic appliances like a fridge. Toddy plays an important role in the Thoti's day to day lives and is the most common drink available. They eat all kinds of seasonal fruits which are available in the forests nearby.



IMG 1: VESSELS



IMG 2: STOVE

### **Marriage Ceremony of Thoti**

More than the marriage ceremony, the process of fixing a marriage is an elaborate feat in the Thoti tradition. There are six types of marriages among them, namely:

1. Marriage by negotiation
2. Marriage by service
3. Marriage by capture
4. Marriage by intrusion
5. Marriage by mutual love and elopement
6. Marriage by exchange.

Thotis do not allow inter caste and inter religion marriages. They are endogamous and while marrying a cross cousin, one cannot marry one's own sister's daughter. Marriage is done at the age of

18 for boy and the girl is married off soon after reaching puberty by 13 or 15 years. Marriage should be arranged within the caste and religion. The surname of the girl will change to the surname of the boy's family after marriage.

The boy's parents find a girl from some other village and asks for the girl's hand in front of the village head of the village that the girl belongs to. The village head in turn asks the girl's parents for their decision on the particular marriage proposal. Earlier it was compulsory for a boy to learn to play anyone of the musical instruments played by the Thoti community during their performances. If the boy doesn't know how to play the musical instruments, it would be difficult for him to ask a girl's hand in marriage as music is the only source of income for Thotis to run their families. They don't have any agriculture lands nor get any contracts to work as labourers. Time has changed now. People are slowly getting into different fields for their livelihood but not many. But during olden days playing of musical instruments and singing for different occasions and giving performances were the only source of livelihood.

Later, if the parents accept the proposal, the village head puts kumkum (vermilion) to the boy's parents and allows the boy and girl to get married. So, after the village head and parents agree for the marriage proposal, the boy's parents put Kumkum to the foreheads of the girl and her parents' as a sign of accepting the girl to be a family member from that moment. Once the Kumkum is put by the parents of the boy to the girl, no one is allowed to approach the girl or her parents with a marriage proposal. The parents of the girl invite everyone from the village and offers feast by giving toddy and meat since the alliance for the marriage has been fixed. After one or two years of this ceremony, the boy and girl get married. Sometimes, it takes almost 10 years for the pair to get married. The reason for this time gap is because the Thotis traditionally give time period for the boy to get settled down and observe if the boy has mastered the art of pandava kathas. The girl's parents go wherever the boy travels for a performance and see if the boy is performing well and is able to earn rice or money. Once they get the confidence that the boy is performing well and can keep the girl happy and comfortable, the families will allow them to get married.

The marriage will be performed at the boy's house. There is no concept of dowry in Thoti community. If the boy has money and the girl doesn't have enough money for the marriage, the boy's parents can offer money to the girl's parents to meet the marriage expenses and it is up to the girl's family on how they spend the given money. They can spend money on toddy, meat or whatever they like to spend it on. Boy's family doesn't ask for an account for the money spent by the girl's side. The family members of the groom invite the bride's family and the village head will begin the process of marriage. In front of the village head both the families get united and the marriage gets over. These days the *brahmins* are the one who is performing marriage ceremonies, but in the olden days it is the village head who used to perform the marriage ceremony. The Thaali (sacred thread) can be made up of gold or it can also be a thread in turmeric and having a turmeric stick tied to it. This thread is tied around the neck of the bride by the groom in the presence of the village head and the villagers. After this, there will be a *mangalaharathi* (part of the Hindu ritual involving fire) during which both the families sing songs related to the marriage and give *aarathi* by lighting the camphor. If the boy has a brother-in-law and sister, both of them will bring *medi chettu*

(Fig tree) and give it to the couple. The families of the bride and groom get five or six pots of toddy and offer a goat as sacrifice to their God *Persapen* (Community god of Thoti).

Everyone will be served toddy in glasses and the mutton which is cooked will also be served along with the toddy in a cup which is made up of *mothuka aaku* (*Butea Monosperma*). Later, all the guests proceed to the feast arranged by the families of the newlywed. After the feast, the groom will be sent to the bride's house. The bride's parents give a new saree to the girl and offer some rice in her *pallu* (loose end of a saree) or saree which is called *oodi biyyam* and sends the girl to the boy's house along with the five members of the girl's family. Next day the village head gets toddy and applies Kumkum to the guests who attended the marriage. He offers toddy to everyone and again a goat is cooked and served to the people gathered. Bride and groom will stay at the bride's house for 3 to 4 days and will go back to groom's house.

### **Belief System**

#### **a) Rebirth:**

The Thotis strongly believe in the concept of rebirth. The puranas that the Thotis sing, talks about rebirth and there stems the belief in rebirth for the Thoti community. They strongly believe that one should not commit any form of crime if he/ she desires rebirth. One has to be pure and shouldn't have any bad intentions towards women, children and neighbours.

#### **b) Religious Belief:**

Traditionally Thotis believe in their community god or Family God "Persapen". In Adilabad district the Thotis also conduct the "*Nagappa Jathara*" (Chariot festival) which is attended by almost every member of the tribe. They also believe in goddess "*Pochamma*" and "*Maisamma*" (village deities). Other than these deities Thotis never worshipped any of the conventional gods or goddesses. But with changing times we now see a gradual acceptance of many of the Hindu gods and goddesses

### **Animal Sacrifice**

Animal sacrifice occupies a major space in the lives of the Thoti community. An event that doesn't require an animal sacrifice is almost close to none. When an animal is sacrificed to the god, the Thotis don't sing any songs. The place of sacrifice should be calm and they just pray for good health and wealth of the villagers. During festivals, either the head of the family will perform the duty of sacrificing an animal, if the participants are of a single family, or a village head will decide who will perform the duty of sacrificing an animal if the entire village participates in the event. The weapon that is used to sacrifice the animal is commonly a knife. Back in the days, they had a ritual of sacrificing cows but the tradition of sacrificing cows is no more practiced. If anyone in a family falls sick, they sacrifice a hen for their community god, Persapen, on Sunday. The person who does this ritual would be the head of the family. After the sacrifice, they cook the sacrificed animal for lunch or dinner since they believe that the god has showered his blessings and they consider the chicken as *prasadam* (offering to God). The practice of seeking medical help with doctors was not prevalent in this tribe.

Sacrifice of pig was a special event reserved for *Ugadi* (Telugu new year) festival. After the sacrifice the meat from the animal is distributed equally among the villagers. But these days the practice of sacrificing pigs is no more. They mostly sacrifice either hens or goats or sheep and serve it as food. They believe that animal sacrifice ensures health and happiness for the villagers.

## Music

Regarding music the people of this community sing songs of their own. They don't sing songs from any movie or songs that are related to the other communities. The Musical instruments used commonly in this community are *Burra* (a mono-stringed instrument), *harmonium*, *maddela* (percussion instrument), and *tAlalu* (cymbals). Some songs will be sung based on *citra patam* (chart containing hand-drawn images used for storytelling). The instrument "Burra" is hand-made by the members of the community. Bamboo sticks are used to make such musical instruments. It's an age-old practice. They have learnt the art of making such musical instruments from their forefathers. They travel to various places when called and sing songs depending on the occasion.



IMG 3: MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

## Dance

Whenever there is any auspicious occasion these people form a group wearing yellow colour and green colour shirts, white color dhoti with green *kanduva* (towel worn on shoulder) on shoulder. These clothes are a must and the community has been following this tradition that has been passed down through generations. They sing songs using their own musical instruments and dance according to it. This dance is performed mostly on festivals like Ugadi or during a village gathering or family gatherings. Ugadi is the festival where everyone visits each other's house and sing and dance together. When they come across people from other community, the Thotis sit along with them and try know the differences between each other's musical instruments, dance etc.

They also dance for death in order to stay awake the whole night. Songs and Dance are the only choice these people opt to be awake for the whole night. They won't bury nor cremate the deceased immediately. They sing and dance for the deceased relatives, trying to pacify the grieving relatives with various songs.

## Medicine

The Thotis have their own ingenious medicinal system that they practice. Though this was the only health care that they resorted to in the earlier days, these days an increased awareness has made the Thotis approach doctors for healthcare issues.

**a) Chickenpox**

A mixture of juices from neem leaves with turmeric is applied over the areas affected with chicken pox. The patient is also made to drink toddy. This procedure is repeated for ten to twelve days until the chicken pox subsides.

**b) Bruises and burns**

In case of cuts and bruises, turmeric is applied to the affected area. When it comes to burns, a powder of the *Nalla Tumma Chettu* (Black Babul tree) is mixed with coconut oil and applied over the affected area.

**c) Snake bite**

Juice from the *Kuppi Aaku* (*Calotropis Gigantea*) is poured into the nose of the affected person. This leaf is also effective for skin diseases.

**d) Dog bite**

*Raagi Paisa* (copper coin), bitter gourd juice and turmeric are wrapped in a cloth and put it on the affected area for 4 or 5 days.

**e) Eyes related problems**

*Aaindapu ginjalu* (Seeds of bottle gourd) are ground and the juice are extracted. A white cloth is dipped into this juice and few drops are squeezed into the eyes. This helps in reducing the burning sensation of eyes or any other eye related issues.

**f) Surgeries**

In olden days, there was not enough money for surgeries and also, they were not aware of surgery to get it done in case of emergencies. Therefore, Thotis treated the pain by tattooing in the concerned area. This practice can be compared to that of acupuncture, but now, people aren't going for tattooing in case any pain because the pain of tattooing is considered higher than that of a surgery. With an increased exposure to the outer world, they now seek the help of doctors for most of their physical ailments.



IMG 4: INSTRUMENTS USED FOR TATTOOING

### Judiciary Settlement

Problems will get settled only under a *Marri Chettu* (Banyan tree). The reason for choosing marri chettu is because the shade provided by the canopy of this tree is wider than the others and also settlements take time and the shades of this tree provide cool air. In case of a problem, the village head or the elder person who settles the problems takes two *Pullas* (sticks) and some money equally from both the accused and the accuser. The village head gets toddy and distributes it to everyone who have assembled at the *Panchayat*. This has become an unspoken rule in their community due to the age-old tradition of serving food and drinks to the guests. The amount spent on toddy will be only half of the collected amount which means they have spent one pulla on panchayat. The delivery of the judgement will happen the day after the distribution of toddy. The remaining half amount, which means one pulla, would be saved by the village head for future settlements.

If the accused is proven to be guilty, then he/she has to pay double the amount of money to the victim. It should be noted that only money was accepted and even valuable things were not accepted by the panchayat. Sometimes, if the accuser or the accused doesn't agree with the judgement of the elderly person (the village head) or if anyone, including the accuser or the accused, have less faith in the village head, the village head gives them the option of choosing the village heads of surrounding villages for the judgements. Then, half of the amount will be spent on toddy and the other half will be spent on the food, accommodation and travel expenses of village heads.

These settlement meetings also require a specific sitting pattern. Everyone sits in a circle and the elder person who settles the issues would sit in the middle of the circle so that his voice could be heard clearly by everyone.

### Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to describe the various cultural aspects of Thoti community. The paper has its own limitations keeping in mind the complexities of data collection and documentation of any

tribal culture. This paper is part of a larger thesis and is a humble attempt at introducing the richness of Thoti tribe and the relationship between their culture and the language to the society.

---

---

### Bibliography

- Carmen, Fought. 2006. *Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Duranti, Alessandro. 1997. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman, J. 1989 *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic perspective*, Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters
- Greenberg, J. 1948. *Linguistics and ethnology*, South Western Journal of Anthropology
- Hymes, Dell. 1974. *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mohanty, P. K., Ramesh C. Malik, Eswarappa Kasi, 2008. *Ethnographic discourse of the other: conceptual and methodological issues*. New Castle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Kumar, Susheel. 2018. *Kinship terms in Thoti community*. Literary Endeavour.
- 
-